

Pentecost 26

November 9, 2008

Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thes 4:13-18; Mt 25:1-13

Introduction. After six years of marriage to Paula, I've learned that she operates on "Greek time." If she calls and says she'll be home around 6:00, I know from experience to figure at least 7:00. Or if she calls from work to say "I'm leaving." I know what she really means is that she's beginning to think about wrapping up her work and coming home. Just as an aside: I love her anyway!

Maybe the bridegroom in today's gospel reading was operating on something like "Greek time." The most likely scenario for a wedding in those days was that the bridegroom goes to the house of the bride, who comes forth with her bridesmaids.

Then they all process to the house of the bridegroom where the rest of the ceremony takes place. During this procession the bridesmaids would carry torches to help light the way.

When, in the parable, Jesus says "Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom," he means they went to the house of the bride, where they would wait until the bridegroom appeared.

In this case, the bridegroom, operating on Greek time, was quite late; and the bridesmaids fell asleep somewhere in the bride's house. At midnight, when the bridegroom finally arrived, half of them realized they have no oil for their torches. Jesus says "They took no oil with them."

Whether he means that literally,
or whether he means they neglected to bring enough to allow for the delay,
his point is clear. "Five of them were foolish, and five of them were wise."

This parable relates closely to Jesus' closing words from the Sermon on the Mount.
When the foolish five finally arrive at the bridegroom's house,
they call out, "Lord, Lord, open to us."
But he replies, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

Jesus ends his sermon with the words: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, ... [but] I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Again, in the parable, Jesus emphasizes that five are foolish, and five are wise.
Similarly, in his conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, he continues:

'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!' [Matt. 7:21-27.]

In both cases the moral of the story is pretty clear:

“Do your homework.

Be prepared.

Don't be foolish.”

Matthew wrote his gospel for an early Jewish Christian community that **clung** to Jesus promise to return soon. Now, 30 some years after his death and resurrection, they were beginning to get concerned about the apparent delay.

For them, Jesus' parable is a warning not to lose heart, and not to get lax in their Christian life.

Jesus could return at any moment;
and they had better prepared, lest the door be slammed shut in their face.

Some of our more conservative brothers and sisters in Christ still find comfort and inspiration in this interpretation. The immense popularity of Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series is a good example.

The premise is that the faithful, the “wise,” will, without warning, be taken to heaven; while the rest of us, the “foolish,” will be left behind for 1,000 years... presumably given a second chance to get it right.

I certainly don't mean to make fun of Jesus' promise to return.
We confess our belief in it every week in the Creed.
But let's be honest: Who here today loses any sleep
over the fear that Jesus may suddenly return and catch you unprepared?

I think **more** is to be gained if we look instead to Jesus' intent as he closes his Sermon on the Mount.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and **acts** on them will be ... wise....

“And everyone who hears these words of mine and **does not act** on them will be ... foolish....”

Perhaps the oil in this parable is meant to represent our life of discipleship.
And the question raised for us is:
What does it mean to be in a relationship with God for the long haul?"

Will I be wise?
Will I build my life on the solid foundation of Jesus' teaching?
Will I follow the way of God's future?

Or, will I be foolish?
Will I build my life on the quicksand of human pride and achievement.
Will I follow the way of the world?

Will I be wise?
Will I recognize all life as a gift from God?
Will I willingly and gladly share what I have?

Or, will I be foolish?
Will I attribute what I have to my own efforts, or perhaps just to luck?
Will I cling desperately to what I have for fear of losing it?

Will I be wise?
Or will I be foolish?
The answer, of course, is... Yes.

As Martin Luther taught,
we are the same time saints and sinners,
wise... and foolish.

Now... **if**, as I suggested, the oil represents our life of discipleship,
and if at times we are bound to be foolish,
then inevitably there **will** be times when spiritually... you run dry.

So... if the primary question raised by this parable is:
What does it mean to be in a relationship with God for the long haul?"
Then a related question is:
What fills you up spiritually when you **have** run dry?
What enables you to keep on following that difficult road into the future of God?

In the parable, the foolish bridesmaids weren't able to borrow oil from the wise.
Likewise, you can't borrow peace of mind from a neighbor.
You can't borrow faith in God's love and forgiveness,
or hope in God's promises.

You have to fill up spiritually on your own,
and then carry it with you every moment of every day,
because believe me... you're going to need it!

That's why we meet together to hear God's promises,
to share in the Lord's Supper,
and to affirm one another in our journey.
That's why we are... the church.

Conclusion. Our hymn of the day is [was] Philipp Nicolai's famous meditation on this parable:
"Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying."

There he portrays so beautifully its theme
not as judgment, but as invitation.
Oh, hear the call!
Come one, come all,
and follow to the banquet hall.

There we will go:
what joy we'll know!
There sweet delight will ever flow.

As you leave here and return to the ministry of your daily life:
Go with your oil replenished.
Go, empowered to live the way of discipleship.
Go, prepared to meet the bridegroom.

And remember:

Waiting for the Lord doesn't mean being resigned to the present.
It means recognizing that the One whom we await is already here,
inviting us to the party; leading us into the glorious future of God.